

## THE CONSISTENCY AND THE QUALITY OF TOURISM SERVICES IN GUESTHOUSES FROM VAMA AND POJORITA AREA

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### Abstract

*The fact that tourists who visit Bucovina relate more and more to quality standards promoted by the EU, forces the guesthouses administrators to point a big part of their attention towards creating a memorable holiday atmosphere.*

*Since we intend, periodically, to check the balance of power between visitors' expectations and what the area can offer in terms of tourism, the accommodations from Vama and Pojorita – Bucovina's standard in hospitality - were subjected to a careful qualitative analysis, in the period April-May 2014.*

*Although we could highlight a number of positive aspects on the local hospitality, cleanliness and the traditional aspects present in the guesthouses, some improvements regarding mainly the qualifications and fidelity of staff, touristic signalling and accessibility, leisure diversification, feedback and inducing a home sentiment to tourists are, however, required.*

**Key words:** *Guesthouses, Tourism services, Quality management, Tourism accessibility, Bucovina.*

**JEL Classification:** *L83, L15, Q57.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development of the Romanian villages requires strategic thinking and foresight that need to be carefully documented by decision makers (Ioan, Rădulescu et al., 2014, p.20), that are interested in the economic reintegration of the disadvantaged areas that are at risk of social dissociation. Unproductive agriculture, extraction of mineral resources and uncompetitive industry from the golden age of communism left behind large territories affected by pollution, thousands of derelict buildings, uncultivated agricultural land and, from a social perspective, considerable uncertainty and job insecurity.

The lack of jobs, population migration to EU countries with an active workforce deficit, and the standard of living, often on the edge of subsistence (Stanciu, Hapenciuc et al., 2014) are clear signs of the generalized economic rebound experienced by Romania in the last 25 years of the great transition from a centralized to a market economy.

Tourism is coming to fill the void left by the economic disaster in the transition to a functional economy. In this context, rural tourism seems to give a chance both to young people so eager to make a career in the hospitality industry and to potential entrepreneurs who see an opportunity in the rural area, a chance for success in an area far away from the urban bustle.

The maturing of the contemporary tourist market and the continuous change of consumer preferences for certain destinations cannot be ignored (Kim, Loksha, 2014, p.379), especially since there is a strong current for touristic activities practiced in nature. Ecotourism, active tourism, rural tourism and agrotourism have already become sustainable forms of exploiting natural resources or, reversely, complex systems for intensive exploitation of natural resources in less demanding areas.

Tourism in Bucovina relies, to a very large extent, on two types of rural accommodation (rural boarding houses and agro-boarding houses), on the potential of exceptional natural and folk traditions, still

present and vibrant in the northern part of Romania (Bouaru, 2009).

The “tourist fever” that swept across the Carpathian mountain range of Maramureş and Bucovina, made some accommodation in the area to copy as much as they could the successful recipes taken from the Rucăr-Bran area, France or Austria. Implementation of these ideas, by themselves or through European funds, allowed the accumulation of some competitive and qualitative issues still unresolved.

The diversification of accommodation options in the last 15 years (Suceava county's Touristic Breviary, 2000-2014), seems to suggest that rural tourism offer is effective in Bucovina and it is in a state of RBA - relative balance area (Stanciu, 2012, p.60) over which any newly established accommodation unit does not have the ability to render more than the market's vitality except for extreme conditions.

The increased consistency and the improved quality of tourism benefits are steps that are needed to be taken into account. They have the ability to confer a competitive advantage, if they are implemented progressively and are based on unbiased market research.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since acceptance of tourism as a fundamental science, the quality of tourism services has been the subject of numerous debates and assessments. Although there have been several attempts of delimitation in regards to optimal service quality in tourism, a consensus has not been reached. Cunnell and Prentice (2000) define "the best quality" in regard to the relationship between increasing competition in the field, and critical-constructive judgment of the actual consumer. So, there are differences in perception of quality (Woo, Uysal, 2013, p.9), at least three points of view; consumers - tourists, the hosts - direct tourism service providers and impartial assessors of tourism and, thus, the quality of tourism services.

An important role in analysing the quality of tourism services from guesthouses hold administrative skills (Chiritescu, Kruzlicika et al., 2013, pp.376-381) learned and implemented by the management unit: organizational capacity, improved performance, teambuilding and consumer behaviour.

Lin, Yang et al. (2014, pp.1-18) have conceptualized a model for analysing service quality, focused on identifying key failures, counteracting the effects caused by them and highlighting the best solutions to satisfy consumer demands.

Certification in tourism is considered an element of quality assurance (Walas, Celuch, 2014) only if the attitude of the entrepreneurs is oriented towards improving satisfaction of tourists. The adoption of certification schemes for accommodation units is

automatically associated with promoting ethic and professional rigor and respect for tourists.

Adopting the national methodological rules relating to the certification of touristic structures is an important condition, but insufficient when unit aspirations are oriented to high quality.

Other authors believe that "eco-label may be an element of differentiation" between competing accommodation units, giving also a "better image" (Lupu, Tanase et al., 2013, p.464) and a qualitative leap in tourism collective mindset. The direct effects of the eco-label marketing are promising for tourism services and involve a low environmental impact, easily identified by consumers tour (Lupu, Tanase et al., 2013, p.458).

On the other hand, decision-making processes initiated by corporate social responsibility (Sandve, Marnburg et al. 2014, p.73), are actions involving regularly, tourist guesthouses and are classified as one of the newest ways of outsourcing quality management.

## III. RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research proposes highlighting those lasting tourism elements which confer more quality to services offered by accommodation units in the area of Vama - (Câmpulung) - Pojorîta, area with the densest concentration of rural tourism in Bucovina. In order to maintain impartiality and to minimize the risk of "subjective contamination" of the investigation it was decided that the structure of the analysis committee to be mixed and include specialists with experience, a representative of academia, a member of The Department of Economics, Business Administration and Tourism in the University "Ştefan cel Mare" of Suceava and two non-governmental organizations interested in sustainable tourism development of the area in the vicinity of the Natura 2000 Rarău-Giumalău site. The interview, conducted from April to May 2014, required several visits to the territory, which involved evaluating the material basis, estimating the quality of touristic services and successive discussions, within one to two hours, with managers of accommodation units of Vama and Pojorîta.

Financial restrictions and high refusal rates have not enabled a comprehensive approach integrating all accommodation units under study area, however, the results that are considered preliminary in nature, will be the basis of further research funded by research grants.

Bucovina is known, at least nationally, for the proverbial hospitality of the hosts, aspect also noticed in accommodations in Vama and Pojorîta. Concentrated efforts of guesthouses administrators, for creating a holiday atmosphere as pleasant and refreshing as possible have started to attract in recent years, tourists from other areas than the traditional national one. According to representatives of local guesthouses, French, Polish, German, Hebrew and Romanian Diaspora (in Spain, Italy, Chernovtsy region

and Moldova) tourists are increasingly interested and present in the analysed area.

This new stage claims that, most likely, local hoteliers increasingly focus more on the quality of the tourism and hence the consistency of specific benefits of the hospitality industry. Care for details and the fact that new tourist segments relate by default to Western European standards, represent an immense service for Bucovina destination - requiring alignment to community values.

In critical terms, analysis in the area of the guesthouses did not find differences between mandatory criteria on the classification of tourism accommodation and the comfort category obtained by them. Complementary, we could say that the vast majority of rooms fall into the standards and are usually furnished in a rustic style (in our analysis gaining 2.38 points out of a maximum of 3 points awarded), the bathrooms were clean, disinfected regularly and properly equipped (1.88 points out of a maximum of 2 granted), almost all rooms have private bathroom, comfortable beds (1.75 points out of a maximum of 2 granted), kitchen and dining area are clean and equipped with furniture and quality service inventory (1.44 points out of maximum 2 awarded).

Important to note is that only 62.5% of the guesthouses involved in research have their own restaurant, the remainder either accepts tourists come with their own food and beverages or allow them to prepare their own meals in the kitchen, or recommend consumption of tourism services in food units in their surroundings. The most typical example of this is given by the Izvor trout farm, which is the place of catering for the many tourists staying in guesthouses of Pojorita.

Guesthouses make this compromise because maintenance costs of a restaurant require large expenditures that cannot be covered by receipts, or they allow tourists to access the kitchen unit, out of the desire not to lose customers. The presence of semi processed food (especially, barbecue meat) brought by tourists to the guesthouse requires the use of separate refrigerators, strictly for customers, and involve a number of risks to health often neglected, overlooked and undertaken by hoteliers, liable to contraventional sanctions.

One of the analysed units has arranged a special room for storing perishable food brought by tourists and meal preparation, on their own in a distinct kitchen from that of the serving unit.

In conclusion, we can say that guesthouses are clean and neat and are characterized by the simplicity of facilities, furnishing and decoration, (1.56 points out of a maximum of 2 given), at a rate high enough. Regarding the quality of tourist services, it becomes apparent that the guesthouses management is constantly interested to increase their quality standards; most of them being receptive to the observations and recommendations of the auditors during site visits.

A number of issues regarding the registration time at the reception, timeliness of their meal and

quality of benefits have not been properly quantified because it was considered that the results would have been irrelevant, tourists being, in this case, in the best position to make such assessment.

"Perfect cleaning is the business card of a guesthouse and, by this, tourists make their first impressions" (<http://www.eurocor.ro>, p.14). The hospitality industry is no place for compromise. Everything must be well maintained, neat and clean.

The perception of the concept of cleaning guesthouses, embraced by the evaluation committee, is not limited to the simple cleaning of the accommodation and food, but presumes, including: smooth and airy layout decorations and tourist instrumentation; relationship of proportionality between rural (classic line) - modern (modernism interference) on a Likert scale, from the original local to vulgar and kitsch and, not least, the way employees perform tasks.

It is difficult to make a clear distinction between the two areas included in the analysis because, in terms of quality, understanding the attribute "cleaning" involves emphasizing the mode of action on preserving hygiene, the way in which it is perceived, distinct by hosts and tourists, and which fall in certain patterns.

One can observe, however, some nuances, indirectly suggested managerial behaviour of administrative staff, experience, written and implicit rules, comfort category of the guesthouse and responsiveness of managers to feedback provided by tourists.

From case to case, cleaning is approached as a measure defining the pensions of 4 and 5 stars and perceived as household item popular with public in most structures of 2 and 3 stars. A very interesting aspect is related to the correlation between perception of quality, intrinsic, of sanitation and tourism entrepreneurship. One guesthouse in Vama is managed by a manager, the rest being family business, managed unilaterally and seen as direct sources of income. Although outsourcing management in rural tourism business is not widely embraced locally, should be noted and appreciated, however, that this management style works well. As proof, the pension in question is the market leader in several ways: most foreign tourists in the area, good report domestic - tourist visibility, ethics and rigor, direct involvement in representing the common interests of guesthouses and recreational diversity. In counterpart, this extra-familial managerial behaviour arises controversy, even envy, and causes dissension within Vama - Bucovina Tourism Association.

Responsiveness of pension administrators on the feedback provided by tourists is superficial and often expressed only as a useful and desirable aspect. Exhaustively, a feedback questionnaire - in the room, at the reception or on the website, does not exist or, in the best cases, is purely decorative. Tourists are not encouraged to provide such a qualitative assessment. The argument of "anti qualitative" decisions is related

to the lack of interest for visitors to complete such forms. "It would be a stress for tourists, and their action would lack objectivity" - is the most common official response. None of the guesthouses use the feedback questionnaire in the rooms anymore and only half of them hold a Suggestions and complaints register or guest books with tourist impressions during their stay in the unit. On the other hand, the quality of guest, somehow compels you to expose the positive aspects rather than frustration and discontent. Many tourists were refocused and post, more frequently in the online, photos and messages regarding the holiday.

Along with breaking ideological barriers related to informal communication, process determined undoubtedly by the appearance of social networking, tourism falls under the Business to Consumer (B2C), where the focus is mainly on the product and its consistency. Reviews by tourists on Facebook, Twitter or on sites like TripAdvisor.com or AmFostAcolo.ro have become at least as important as the assessment provided by the feedback questionnaires.

In 7 of 10 cases reviews from virtual space are positive and present, in a complimentary manner, tourism services offered by analysed accommodation units in Vama and Pojorîta. Travel websites show quite accurately the reality of the analysed pensions. However, the values assume a certain amount of subjectivity because the huge number of posts on social networks (like Facebook) cannot be scanned and objectively quantified, reference to pensions in Bucovina wearing extremely diverse forms (messages, photos, likes etc.).

Another relatively new criterion associated with a high quality of tourism benefits, depends on customers' access to Internet services and mobile operators. It is true that many of the tourists feel the need to break away from the vices of the modern world - and unrestricted instant access to commercial technology and social media, but not on the entire duration of their stay. The biggest problem of guesthouses managers in Pojorîta, especially of the structures located along the access path to massive Rarău, designed to cover low or no GSM signal, a phenomenon due to the effect of obscurity in conjunction with electromagnetic shielding, and difficulty of connecting to the internet. Communication can be affected firstly because the incidence of bookings online will be lower, while the telephone booking will be difficult, and secondly, prevent tourists from spending more time on Facebook in order to make their presence known in the area. From this point of view, guesthouses in Vama are clearly advantaged because they do not have such problems.

In terms of value for money, our assessments have estimated that there is some parity (2.19 maximum 3 points awarded), but there are also situations where consistency and quality of tourism services is slightly overstated. For 4 and 5 stars guesthouses this marketing strategy is an important form of customer segmentation.

The comparison between the two cities reveals that for Vama proportion of what is being offered and the price charged is more balanced (2.25 out of 3 points) than the Pojorîta (2.13 out of 3 points). This is justified, in some respects, and by the fact that most guesthouses have 3-4 stars in Vama, while in Pojorîta the amplitude is higher, with guesthouses with 5, 4 and 3 and even 2 stars.

In the field of hospitality, service quality perception is intimately linked to tourist satisfaction, attributes that combined with the experience of consumers have a direct impact, striking on behavioural intentions, while choosing accommodation structures and hence upcoming holiday destinations.

If in economic terms this becomes somewhat synonymous with judicious evaluation of the relationship tourist offer - price, from social perspective tourism quality implies the unconscious need of the tourist to radicalize the concept of "home".

The accommodation must be for tourist, at least similar to the comfort of home, if not comparable to what would be required in daily life, but for various reasons could not afford or failed to get home. Tourists want to feel special and want to be treated preferentially, a feeling comparable to home entertainment. "Home" is synonymous with high standards of quality accommodation since facilities and benefits provided embedded in the tourist offer of guesthouses, should be above those at home or recall, from a diachronic point of view, the traditional lifestyle existing in the parental household (house) .

For administrators of rural guesthouses adjacent to Rarău Mountains, the elements that make the stay as pleasant for tourists are strongly associated with typical Bucovina hospitality and harmony of nature and culture (Table 1). A special role is held by meals - that always have to be consistent and rich - true culinary delights, and the promotion of the most common ways to enjoy the time spent in the guesthouse. Grill, classic holiday sports (football, ping-pong, board games / cards, backgammon etc.), visits to the sheepfold, and short hikes, usually on their own in the neighbourhood require too little from tourists. For this reason, we believe that recreation is vitiated by the greatest asset provided by the area - Natura 2000 site Rarău-Giumalău mountain scenery of rare beauty of the namesake Mountains.

**Table 1. The elements of differentiation between guesthouses in Vama and Pojorîta**

Atributes	Guesthouses Vama	Guesthouses Pojorîta	Assessment of experts
<b>Inducing feeling of "home"</b>	a. Location (near the forest) b. The external and interior appearance of the pension c. Offered services d. Recreation e. Recovery and valorisation of local traditions	a. The general atmosphere b. Tourist Comfort c. Peace and detachment of tourist d. Meeting consumer needs e. A menu reminiscent of family meals from childhood	a. The location of the guesthouse b. Design and facilities c. Menu d. Cultivating a long term relationship between staff and tourists e. Information a posteriori
<b>Challenges</b>	Tourism experienced staff inconsistency The existence of a Roma community nearby	Lack of qualified staff Limited leisure possibilities	Deficiency of qualified personnel in accommodation units The dissonance between existing tourism resources in the area and leisure offer
<b>Local tourism vectors</b>	Cooperation between Guesthouses	Proximity of Rarău Mountain	Tourist integrated DMO

Source: Realised by authors based on exploratory research

It is remarkable that some differences occur, differences of nuance between the two areas of focus in Bucovina. In view of Vama tourism hosts, location, closer to the forest, is a competitive advantage, dissenting opinion in relation to terms of Pojorîta tour operators, focused rather on accessibility and proximity of Rarău than the proximity of the forest. In view of the external evaluators in the field, emphasis should be placed in a greater extent on retrospective information, where experience gained through networking of hospitality industry workers with tourists contributes to a greater extent to the consolidation of a coherent marketing policy, competitive and persuasive. Major challenges of tourism in the Vama - Pojorîta area are inherent to transition periods to market economy, are related to collective mentality and social system of values, and characterize, moreover, the national tourism sector as a whole. Education and training in the field present a disinterested-divergent character as local tourism industry relies not, at least for now, on performance. Unfortunately, there is no clear link between theory and applied activities, proved by internship stages, as tour operators are also not interested in encouraging the practice (student or high school) at workplace because the liability of potential practitioners is not motivationally based.

Salaries in hotel business are small, tip is legally unregulated, advancement opportunities are limited and difficult to overlook, and retirement prospects were not at all encouraging. With some exceptions, professions such as receptionist, waiter, floor governess (maid) do not guarantee employment for more than 3-5 years in the same unit. The risk that, after the training period, migration of young labour force becomes a fact, creates the premises of a vicious circle in which the tourist is most frequently lost. Insertion of young labour force in home rural areas is very difficult. Recent experienced graduates choose either to go work abroad, either are turning to major cities with tourist potential, like Bucharest, Constanta and Prahova Valley.

Along with deficiency of qualified personnel, administrators of guesthouses in the vicinity of Câmpulung Moldovenesc face a number of problems related to the effective management of tourism resources through recreation. Expansion possibilities are limited, leisure offer is relatively poor. The blame lies on both local authorities who refuse to work together and tourist entrepreneurs who prefer to organize individual, even disparate, without taking into account the needs of consumers of tourism services. For example, instead of integrating in the local tourism offers a common tourist route to Rarău or a cultural-religious integrated circuit (tour of monasteries), they prefer more initiatives on their own, with few tourists and / or without accompanying guide .

Marketing policies in BMD should be treated with great caution because the appropriate dosage of human capital, financial, material and informational resources allows local tourism sustainable recovery. Tourist toning also requires, in this case, valuing the huge potential given by the proximity of the Natura 2000 site Rarău-Giumalău.

Recent years have transformed the status of consumer travel from passive actors to active participants in the development and certification of tourism products. Increasingly tourists signal directly to the economic agent or "to the public" matters outside the areas of competence of tourism operators, guesthouses and other providers in the hospitality industry, which were perceived as unsatisfactory in relation to tourist expectations. Most often are claimed: bad road conditions, improper marking landmarks, tourist routes and signalling territory, defective, accommodation units.

Comparing the three indicators (Table 2), action carried out this time by the third category of stakeholders - experienced tourist evaluators highlights a number of local features for consolidating an overview on the tourism accessibility of the area and ease of tourist orientation in the analysed rural areas.

**Table 2. The quality of access roads and location in the field of tourism elements of Vama and Pojorîta**

Codification guesthouses	Guesthouses Pojorîta				Guesthouses Vama				Maximum points that could be awarded
	PP1	PP2	PP3	PP4	PV1	PV2	PV3	PV4	
<i>Roads conditions (General)</i>	55%				41,66%				100%
National and European roads	2				3				3
Access roads to and from accommodation unit	0,75	3	0,5	2	1,5	0,75	0,5	0,5	3
<i>Marking and Signalling landmarks (General)</i>	6,66%				10%				100%
Local Attractions marked (road signaling panels and other forms of directing)	1 (Rarău Mountain)				1,5 („Stâlpul lui Vodă”, Egg Museum, Hrib Festival in September)				3
Local themed marked trails with departure from guesthouse	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Signaling guesthouses (general)	15%				38,33				100%
Signalling at the main access routes	0	0	2	0	3	1	2	1	3
Signalling on the road to the pension	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	3
Billboard on entry into the pension	0	1,5	0	0	0	0	1,5	0	1,5

Source: Realised by authors based on exploratory research

So, the following defining aspects can be revealed (Table 2):

- For tourists, accommodation in Pojorîta are more accessible in terms of road than the neighbouring village Vama (55% compared to 41.66%), because most of the guesthouses are situated along the main access roads or in the immediate vicinity thereof. In guesthouses in Vama, although obvious the presence of a wide variety of tourist services and, apparently, a better integration into the landscape, there are still a number of technical shortcomings that hinder easy identification in the territory of the unit. Township access roads of Vama are narrow, winding and predominantly unpaved.
- Signalling guesthouses along the axis of European road E57 is relatively well made in Vama and sporadic in Pojorîta. Orientation of the tourists on secondary roads is, however, undesirable in both cases and may even embarrass the tourists because, on a daily basis, signs at the entrance are missing.
- There are more noticeable the accommodation units in Vama working in a larger extent with foreign tourists.
- Some guesthouses in Pojorîta, focused on a luxury clientele or above average income, do not signal their presence interest because this implies a potential additional intake of tourists who cannot be durably absorbed and properly treated by the accommodation. This carelessness betrays a lack of communication and collaboration, locally, between guesthouses, as evidenced by the lack of an association of guesthouses of

Pojorîta to defend the interests of tourism service providers.

- Sights / tourism potential in both locations are insufficiently enhanced, and if we were to refer to any local tours, departing from guesthouses, their marking and signage is quasi-non-existent.

Another important aspect linked to signalling guesthouses, puts small entrepreneurs of Pojorîta and Vama against considerable legal challenges. Under the legislation (OG 43/1997, supplemented and amended by Ordinance 7/2010), placing billboards in footprint or safety zones of European and national roads, part of the national transport system is only allowed under the building permit and only with a prior agreement between the economic entities directly concerned with promoting outdoor and road communication lines custodian.

The documentation authorizing the outdoor advertising, along national and European roads requires a portfolio implies the existence of 17 items. The most important parts in the file are the finding note, Traffic Police Service opinion, urbanism certificate, land ownership act, resistance calculation summary, a memorandum, framing plan, sketch plan and the panel. File preparation takes time and involves significant financial costs for operators in tourism, a sector which does not require obtaining substantial income. On the other hand, failure to comply with these provisions is an offense punishable under the law, with a fine between 1,000 and 4,000 lei. After the public notice of February-March 2014, due to excessive bureaucratization of the conditions for advertising in the vicinity of access roads, many of the Vama and Pojorîta tour operators have decided to give up street billboards, which gave rise to problems of territorial orientation, which constituted an obvious discomfort factor for tourists.

## CONCLUSION

The results obtained lead us to consider that the quality - price and consistency report of offered tourism products reflects quite accurately the range of tourism satisfaction, checked-up, moreover, by the feedback of those who visited the area.

Unfortunately, some of guesthouses in Northern Romania run without considering the issue of improving the quality of services offered to tourists. Quality can integrate, on the one hand, improving existing services, and diversifying the range of available services to tourists - more specifically confer consistency to the tourism offer. Not considering these issues will have a boomerang effect, affecting, sooner or later, the business. As soon as the guesthouses in Bucovina realize the need for a change of perspective, and take action accordingly, the risk of "cannibalizing" the guesthouses and subsequent painful decline in the number of tourists will subside.

In terms of market equilibrium, supply tends to exceed demand, and as demand remains in some tolerable margin, the offer must fit it, uncompetitive units will exit the tourist circuit, or marginally, will maintain tourism activities without legal forms. Clearly, the oversupply will generate a „polishing” of the supply and indirectly increase the quality of tourism benefits.

On the other hand, compression of tourist arrivals, as evidenced since 2008, accompanied by a decrease or disappearance of days with consistent snow cover during the winter holidays, should be the first warning sign. The situation requires managers of guesthouses to seek solutions to improve the supply, while streamlining the system of tourism services.

Cultivating a long-term relationship between a boarding house staff and tourists seems to be a feasible solution. Adapting supply to demand is much easier than adapting demand to offer, since interpersonal communication has the merit that it allows a number of corrective measures to keep tourists in the area of psychosocial comfort.

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